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ABSTRACT

This transcript of a National Public Radio broadcast records the presentation and discussion of various issues concerning the role of community members in local school districts. Topics addressed include control of the schools by the poor, the middle class, teacher unions, parents, the PTA, and community groups; a parents' union in Philadelphia; minority group control of schools in New York City; and what community control of local schools has gained. (EB)

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"COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SCHOOLS"
June 26, 1978

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"COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SCHOOLS"

CHILD: A...

CHILD: B...

CHILD: C...

MAN: D...

WOMAN: H...

MAN: I...

MAN: J...

CHILD: K...

MAN: L...

TEENAGER: M...

WOMAN: N...

WOMAN: O...

WOMAN: P...

MERROW: T-I-O-N-S -- options -- OPTIONS IN EDUCATION. From the ABC's of pre-school to the alphabet soup of government programs, this is OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

* * *

WOMAN: As a parent, with children in high school and one in an elementary school, I suffer the same frustration as every other parent in this city. And that is having little to no voice in who the teachers are going to be who teach in my child's school. If I run into a teacher of one of my children that is going to begin to create problems, then I am going to go out and I'm going to raise hell about it. That's all there is to it.

MAN: Parents should have their own union just like the teachers have their union, somebody that they would have a voice, that they would be able to speak out. Other little small groups have a group and they claim that they can speak nationally. Parents want to be able to understand and see what's happening to the money concerning their kids.

* * *

MERROW: Those parents want to be more involved in their kids' schools, beyond going to an occasional PTA meeting.

REINHARDT: But how involved is too involved? Where do you draw the line?

MERROW: Should parents and the local community decide what's taught in school? Should they choose the textbooks?

REINHARDT: Should parents have a say in hiring -- and firing -- teachers? In choosing the school principal? In setting the budget?

MERROW: In most cities and towns in this country, communities do have at least general control over the schools, through the local school board.

REINHARDT: That's called "local control" of the schools, and that's something that just about everyone can endorse, just as everyone is against federal control of the schools.

MERROW: Sure, local control is like baseball, apple pie, and all those other good things.

REINHARDT: Well, it's not really that simple. There are dull baseball games. And apple pie can be too sweet. And so maybe we should take a look at the idea of local control and see what it really means. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow. Most of the time, schools and their communities share the same ideas about education. If you don't want your kids reading "Catcher in the Rye" or "Slaughterhouse Five" or studying birth control methods, and if you can get enough people to agree with you, then the school board will probably bend to your will.

REINHARDT: But does "local control" really mean that you and I directly control what goes on in our kids' schools? Not at all. First, there's a school board to set policy. There are all sorts of rules and regulations. There are teacher unions, and there's a hugh educational bureaucracy.

MERROW: Most of the time, schools boards, rules and regulations and so forth aren't really noticed because there's general agreement. It's those times when schools and communities don't share the same goals that the bureaucracy is most visible.

REINHARDT: That's likely to happen when the school district is huge, with about one million pupils. Can a school board of 15 or 16 people really be responsive in that situation?

MERROW: Or suppose the board and nearly all the administrators and teachers are white, and nearly all the students black and brown. Is there local control then?

REINHARDT: Poverty causes problems too, especially when the power is in the hands of the middle class.

CONTROL OF SCHOOLS BY THE POOR V.S. MIDDLE CLASS

COTTLE: You also have the fundamental sense of alienation. The schools belong to the suburban parents; they can bash in there any time. "Hey, it's my taxes; I can get you fired, baby, any time I want." What does the urban parent have to say? It's municipal funds; they have no say in the whole thing.

REINHARDT: That's Thomas Cottle, a writer, teacher and social psychologist. Many other obasevers make the same point: suburbanites, usually white and middle class or above, do have control. The schools reflect their tastes, beliefs, biases, down the line.

MERROW: But that's often not true for people in cities, or for the minorities, or the poor.

REINHARDT: Tom Looker talked with Thomas Cottle.

COTTLE: I think still it's the case that, in the main, parents of the city, where the parents are poor and the families are poor -- and particularly poor and minority -- they are denied any power or access to power. They're denied even the sight of power. They see number two person, number three person. They never see the top dogs. But more and more, there are efforts by parents to try to take some kind of lead, some kind of role and some kind of action. But in the main, I would say systematically they're not. Now, there's one final bottom line to this. I'm not so sure, I'm not arguing either way, that the good school is in fact the school that has great adult participation. Just because you're letting parents in doesn't automatically make that school better. It may be that some schools are run in such a way that parents feel so content with the way they're run, they let the principals and teachers do their job. But the root of community control, to me, are such issues as powerlessness, alienation, oppression -- people not having a voice, not having a say in the running of their lives and the creation of their destinies.

And they want, in the schools, because it's something real as well as symbolic, about controlling the destinies or creating or enhancing the destinies of their children. Community control of schools is not the answer and it's not the question. I would have to look at it in the context of each particular case. And I could document for you cases where I think it's absolutely the most glorious model, and other cases where it's no good.

LOOKER: So, you're saying that there would be some situations where parents might not feel alienated from their schools, and yet be quite happy not to have control over them.

COTTLE: There are a lot of schools in this country where parents feel they have total access to the school, where parents feel they're really part of the school community, where they intervene maybe not at all in the four years of high school and not at all in the eight years of the junior school, where they feel, "These are good teachers and I will back these teachers." Now there is also apathy; there's also people who don't care, who want to have babysitters for their kids, whatever. But really, there are lots of parents who feel there is no reason to interfere, intervene. And there are other cases where the situation in the schools is so unconscionable that parents say, "I've got to do something; we've got to organize. This is an unbearable situation.

Where you have a school that's predominantly a minority, as far as student body is concerned, and it's predominantly whites who have nothing to do with the culture of these people that go to that school running that school, there's got to be slippage, if not open oppression. I don't want to attribute open oppression. There are so many problems in schools. Parents are the only ones who can save that kind of a school. They've got to get in, they've got to organize, they've got to do something.

REINHARDT: Thomas Cottle, a writer, teacher and social psychologist, talking with Tom Looker, WFCR, Amherst, Massachusetts.

MERROW: Cottle says that demands for community control arise when the community feels oppressed and powerless. But, he's careful to point out that community controlled schools are no panacea -- they can be awful.

REINHARDT: Dr. Kenneth Clark, an educator and psychologist, agrees that poor minorities are out of power. Clark says that most of the power is in the hands of the bureaucrats, but he reminds us that teacher unions have a lot of clout too.

CONTROL BY TEACHER UNIONS

CLARK: In the working class communities, the bureaucracies do have control, and the unions. The new ingredient that's been added to the educational dynamics in public education is a growing, powerful, and -- like all other labor unions -- self-interested teachers union movement. The group that is being paid to perform a service for the society seems to me now to be calling the shots in the level and quality of service that it will perform. I think, sooner or later, the society will have to adjust itself to that. It will reform the school system toward increased efficiency only when it makes clear that it cannot pay money to a group of people who, by their own self-interest, will determine how much they will work for.

LOOKER: To make that more concrete, you're saying that teachers are too much in control of what goes on in the schools.

CLARK: The teachers, the educators, the supervisors, are making their own judgment as to the quality of their performance. Certainly, the average working class, minority, low income parents are not in charge. They are victims of whatever goes on in their schools. In suburban schools, it seems to me, the suburban, middle class or upper middle class parents -- those who send their children to public schools -- are effectively influencing what goes on in the schools because their upward mobility goals demand that they see that the schools function to increase the college board scores of their youngsters. So they are more in charge and the bureaucracies are really not controlling the educational process in middle class and upper middle class communities. Because the bureaucracies have to be responsive to an alert, articulate, aspiring set of parents who put a tremendous amount of pressure on the schools and on their children, et cetera.

REINHARDT: Dr. Kenneth Clark, an educator and psychologist, talking with Tom Looker.

MERROW: Community control isn't new. It was a highly publicized and controversial idea back in the mid 1960s, particularly in New York City, where

it was called "decentralization."

REINHARDT: New York City tried it for a short, strife-ridden time, and the scars are still not healed. Several regions of the city were allowed to elect community school boards, which had some authority to select principals.

MERROW: Race became an issue immediately, because the communities involved were almost entirely black or brown, and the teachers and administrators were white. So too were most of the names on the list of those eligible to become principals, but the community school boards didn't want to choose from the names on the list. They had other names of minorities who weren't on the approved list.

REINHARDT: When New York City experimented with community control, Albert Shanker quickly became perhaps its most outspoken foe. Shanker, the president of the local teacher union as well as the national union, the American Federation of Teachers, led a successful teacher strike that fall. And he was a key figure in defeating decentralization.

MERROW: Today, Albert Shanker says he believes in "local control" of schools, but never in "community control."

THE VIEWS OF ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: "Local control" means that local elected officials, whether they be mayors or county legislators and supervisors, or school boards, have certain legal powers under our system. "Community control" is a movement which is pretty dead now. It came up in the 1960s. It was part of the rebelliousness in various segments of society. And the meaning of that was that various groups within a community, not necessarily representative, but any organized group, decided that it had the right to take over and control some local institutions. And we went through that phase, and I don't see any of it anywhere.

MERROW: When you say "community control," you mean special interest groups: "local control" means everybody.

SHANKER: Oh no. I think everybody's a special interest group, not just community control. Certainly the school board, elected people can represent special interest as well as appointed people can. But there's a difference in a democratic society. At least if someone's elected you know that they represent special interests to the extent that enough special interests turned out to elect them. Whereas, if I've got 15 people who walk into a school and demand that a principal be fired or that a certain textbook be burned or that a certain curriculum be changed, I might represent just those 15 people; I might not represent anybody beyond them. So that I think when you talk about elected government versus self-appointed government or self-selected spokesmen, I think that's the issue. The issue is how representative are they and have they come to any sort of power and influence through any sort of democratic procedure. The only people who go around with community control are people who couldn't be elected dogcatcher. And after someone else wins and they lose, then they walk into the institution and say, "We represent the people and we should take over." Now that isn't democracy. It's chaos and it's anarchy. People who are not elected do not have a right to control.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. He says community control is non-existent, that only a handful of die-hards are even talking about it.

MERROW: If he's right, then one of the die-hards is Dave Spencer of Education Action Resource in New York City. I talked to Spencer in Chicago recently.

MINORITY CONTROL IN NEW YORK CITY

SPENCER: The problem in New York City is that the parents there, no matter whether they're black, Puertorican, or poor, really have no say in their schools. Bureaucrats run the schools. The mayor's now talking about how he's going to be responsible for the schools. Therefore he's going to decide that

we change to a new system that would give him more votes on the board. Parents don't have any of those votes on the boards of what will happen in them schools. Now, we've got school boards, but the central board controls them also. So, if they send a budget to us they say, "That's all you can get because it comes from the school board." But the school board sends in a budget for everyone's school and no one knows how the money is being divided. Parents want to be able to understand and see what's happening to the money concerning their kids.

MERROW: How would you do it? How would you bring about community control of schools?

SPENCER: I think it's something we're both, teachers in New York City and parents and principals, should be working together for the betterment of their schools.

MERROW: Yeah, but that's not going to help. I mean, teachers have their own intersts; they have a union. Administrators have their own interests.

SPENCER: Where that's where I think parents, they should have their own union just like the teachers have their own union. Somebody that they'd have a voice to be able to speak out. Other little small groups have a group and they claim that they can speak nationally. PEA, NEA, all of them, claim that they can speak nationally. NEA ain't got but 400,000 people in their group, and there's millions of parents--

MERROW: --NEA has 1.7 million members. AFT has 400,000--

SPENCER: --But you've got more than 1.7 million members of parents across this country that should come together and have some kind of voice--

MERROW: --You say "should." But how would it happen? How would you make it happen?

SPENCER: Well, the trick really would be to make parents understand what's going on in the schools, giving them some of the rules that's going on in the schools, and also informing them enough so that they would have some kind of input into who be hired and what goes on in their school. If you're going to talk about improvement, then people are going to have to get together, no matter what the races are. And I think forever you will have people fighting when one group of people is going to take charge of another group of people's lives. You'll have people fighting. And that's all there is to it.

MERROW: The theory of public schools is that they're a democratizing institution. We all get to know each other and we get along better because we're going to school together. But if you set up community controlled, non-public schools, you can set up your schools, I can set up my schools. I mean, isn't that going to make the differences--

SPENCER: --But we're doing that now. I mean, you keep acting like we're not doing that. That's the problem. That does not mean I wouldn't work with white, black, pink, or yellow. If a guy is good -- I say if Einstein came to Harlem tomorrow, we'd take him right on in. That would be no problem. We have no racism when you start talking about education, who's the smartest and who can do the job. The main thing is that we want to see the job get done, that's all.

MERROW: In your talk this morning, you said one race can't educate another race. And you also said one of the problems with the New York City public schools is that there are too many folks from Israel. Now that's racism right there, isn't it, coming from you?

SPENCER: Yes, that's racism coming from me. Coming from me, that would be racism if that's how you want to term it. But what I'm really talking about is that very few of my people have a chance to work with their own people. And I know I wouldn't be able to go into Israel and take a million of my people and go over there and run the schools in Israel. So if that's what you want to call racism, that's what I'm talking about. That we want a fair shake at at least making some input into our children and what we think is best for our kids. You know, you had a problem with school lunches, because you began to feed children in Harlem Chinese food and all kinds of stuff that they had no

taste for. Therefore the food's wasted. So we'd rather spend money and waste it than to really feed people.

MERROW: Are you saying the problem with New York City's schools is that they're controlled by Jews? Or that they're not controlled by blacks?

SPENCER: No.

MERROW: Why is it when you talk positively you say parents want this, parents that. But when you describe what you see as the enemy, you talk about Jews?

SPENCER: No, I think I'm not talking about Jews. I think if I was in Connecticut I'd talk about Italians. If I was down South, I'd talk about black teachers. As long as they were destroying children in schools. It's not fault that a certain group of people happen to get control of the situation. If you're talking about a democratic process, then everybody should have some input into that. And that's what I think that we're having problems with right now, because everybody wants to control the destiny of other people.

REINHARDT: Dave Spencer, a veteran of the battle over community control and decentralization in New York City. Spencer, who is black, says his position is neither racist nor anti-semitic, but represents the anger and frustration of powerless parents.

MERROW: Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, and himself Jewish, agrees that Spencer's comments aren't necessarily racist or anti-semitic.

MORE FROM ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: Well, it could be anti-semitism, but mostly it's stupidity. Because, in our society, one group has always educated another group. Most immigrants come to our big cities. New York has certainly been an outstanding example of this as a port of entry for millions and millions of people. And the immigrants who came in were never frequently teachers. They couldn't speak our language. And it was the previous group of immigrants whose children went to college and became teachers who educated the next group. So, you know, if the Irish couldn't teach Jews, then the Jews would still be illerate. And if some group of Protestants who were here before the Irish couldn't teach Irish Catholics, then the Irish would still be illerate. I think the statement just shows a lack of any understanding of the history of our country.

The fact is that blacks are learning. There are more and more blacks in college. The figures show that. More and more are graduating; more and more are entering professions. And, by and large, most blacks in the country are being taught by white teachers.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker, president of the Americ Federation of Teachers, the teacher union.

MERROW: The power to decide how many teachers should be black, or Puerto Rican, or Jewish, is only one form that "community control" can take. Community control advocates often make other demands -- get rid of certain books; keep kids in neighborhood schools and out of busses that would take them across town.

* * *

MERROW: Teacher unions are often cited as the major obstacle to parents controlling what goes on in schools, particularly in our cities. But in Philadelphia, "union power" is receiving the highest form of flattery, imitation. There some parents have formed a "parents union."

REINHARDT: Happy Fernandez and Florence Robinson are parents who work full time, on salary, for the parents union. They are, in fact, the only two fulltime paid employees.

MERROW: The union has 300 members in 20 schools. But, in all, Philadelphia has 300 public schools.

REINHARDT: And they say they want to share the power; they're not trying to take over. But, they say, the teachers union doesn't trust them.

A PARENTS UNION IN PHILADELPHIA

ROBINSON: I have found that, with the teachers union, they feel that we are out to harm them. But it's not that. We want everyone to work together for the quality of education of our children. And they have just got the wrong idea that we want to destroy the teachers union or the teachers.

MERROW: Why do they think that?

ROBINSON: Uh, and I don't want to say all of them. It's some really, like everything else, it's always a few. But, because of the rights that we have brought, about just having, looking at your child's records, you know. And we found that if the records have something on them that the teacher has put there, you can get them taken off. So, actually, the teachers have gotten the idea that the parents are trying to hurt them. Which it's not. We are trying to save our children. And we feel that we are the ones that know our children. And we should know what they're doing and what's being wrote on the record that will go with them the rest of their life. Not only records, but suspensions, and all these things that happen, maybe because a teacher has misunderstood or whatever. Now we're not fighting them, but we don't want the harm to happen to our children.

FERNANDEZ: I think it's important to make a distinction between the leadership of the teachers union and the teacher in the local school. And, my experience is, a lot of teachers, classroom teachers in the local school, feel about as powerless in the whole system as parents do. I would say we have the support of many classroom teachers and other staff in the local school, where we have been opposed, however by the leadership of the teachers union. One example which sort of highlights where we differ was when the school board was discussing the adoption of a parent bill of rights and responsibilities. The teachers union came out very strongly, publicly at the board meeting and said they would oppose to their death the right of parents to visit schools and classes. They did not want that included in the parent bill of rights.

They also did not want a parents bill of rights to include a grievance procedure for parents. And I think that's symptomatic of the really narrow-sided viewpoint of the leadership of the teachers union.

MERROW: Who won?

FERNANDEZ: Who do you think? Of course, since the teachers union is the most powerful power block in the system, or second to the administration, the board of education bowed to the threats and pressure of the teachers union.

MERROW: So, you don't have a right to visit your kid's classroom?

FERNANDEZ: That right has not been tested in the courts, which I assume it will be someday. But that right was not part of the parent bill of rights adopted by the school board. To my knowledge, though, there's no law saying parents don't have that right. But there's been no legal case saying that they do. So we act as parents, and we encourage people to act on the assumption that we do have the right to visit school classes since they're our schools and they're educating our children.

MERROW: The two leaders of the Philadelphia parents union, Happy Fernandez and Florence Robinson. The parents union is six years old. It has been primarily funded by private foundations.

REINHARDT: Funding from foundations is a sore point with Albert Shanker. He says such groups couldn't exist if they had to get their support entirely from parents.

MORE FROM ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: In Phildelphia, the only reason you have a parents union is because it was subsidized by a major national foundation. Sure, if you come in

and give parents money to be active, and pay them for it, and give them all sorts of legal assistance to do that with tax exempt funds, sure they'll do it.

MERROW: You don't think they'd do it otherwise?

SHANKER: They haven't done it any place in the United States. There's no place they've done it without foundation funds.

MERROW: Do you think they should? Would you like to see more parents in the schools?

SHANKER: I would like to see more parents seeing to it that their own children do the work that they're supposed to do.

MERROW: That's not the question I asked.

SHANKER: Yes, but I'm talking about what will help children. And I'm not talking about the handfull of parents who are basically not operating as parents, but are operating like any other political figures in the community. They have a right to do that. But the handfull of people who involve themselves in so-called parents unions are not performing as parents. They're really trying to take over the functions of the school board. What they ought to do is run for office. And when they get elected, they ought to run the school board.

MERROW: You have a reputation of being hostile towards parents coming into the schools, going into the classes, working with teachers or just watching teachers.

SHANKER: I'm not hostile to parents coming into schools or watching teachers. As a matter of fact, you know, in New York City, there is no one who keeps parents out. They have a right to come any time they want. And many of them do. I think, though, that it's very important to distinguish visiting the schools, seeing what goes on there, from trying to take over authority in the schools. We had one district some years ago where a dozen parents walked through each room and they decided that they would evaluate each teacher on the basis of what was happening in the classroom at that particular moment. I don't think that's particularly legitimate, and I also don't believe that the parents who stayed home that day, or the overwhelming majority, would want any group of self-selected parents walking through and deciding who teaches in schools that way.

If you have an awful lot of people coming in and out, you disturb the normal routines of the school. Children can be very volatile; they can be very noisy. It can be very difficult even under the best of circumstances. But if, on top of all the other problems that teachers have, you're going to have constant groups of people coming in and out -- not just for the purpose of expressing a concern with their own children, but each one who doesn't like one teacher or doesn't like the textbook or doesn't like what's taught is going to start making noise at that particular time -- I think before you do a little bit of that, you won't have any teachers at all.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the teachers union.

MERROW: Right about now you may be getting the idea that the only thing standing between parents and parent power is the union, personified by Albert Shanker.

REINHARDT: Well, not so. Standing right along side Shanker, but speaking in more subtle terms, are most school administrators.

MERROW: Their reasoning is often different, but it adds up to the same grand total: parents should either work with their own children or run for the school board. There's no middle ground.

HOW FAR SHOULD PARENTS GO?

PARKS: Never in the history of Western civilization have parents controlled the school system. Okay? Now, parents have participated in the

educational process from time to time at various levels, but they've never controlled the school system. And anyone who want to take a look at that -- at least my research shows me that that has never been the case. Parents have more access to school buildings since the 60s, now the 70s than ever in the history of this country. Because in the 30s and 20s and even before the turn of the century, parents were not welcome into school buildings. There were no open door policies for parents to come in. The PTAs were never controlling bodies. They were supportive bodies. The teachers worked with the PTAs because they needed to buy some curtains, put some rugs on the floor. Or they were supportive of the needs of the kids in the schools. But they were always supportive units, not controlling units. The only controlling unit we have for parents in school boards.

REINHARDT: Paul Parks, the Secretary of Education in Massachusetts. We've heard from parents who want in, and from educators who want them out. Is there a middle ground? Someone who hints there might be compromise is Dr. William Smith, a former public school administrator who runs the Teacher Corps, a federal program.

IS THERE A MIDDLE GROUND?

SMITH: A community does not want to control education. A community wishes to have the most available information about what's happening in that system. My contention is that community people don't have time to run their schools. Community people have time to prepare their children to be served by that school. And, in the process, their greatest need is to have the most reliable, up-to-date, and accessible information. And, if people have information, they then are in a position to make judgments about the extent to which control is or is not necessary. We, as educators, historically have had, for some reason or other, that because we were professional educators, we had the questions and the answers and didn't need any help.

I think it is quite clear that, in a period of time where Watergate, where consumer advocacy, where Ralph Nader and his success with General Motors, has become a way of life -- where teacher power, and teacher power especially, in terms of President Carter, Vice President Mondale and the whole series of Congresspersons who have been elected by virtue of teacher organizations and labor organizations -- there is no longer any naive assumption that the business of educating people, and children especially, is going to be left to a single group. The real question, and the fundamental question, is one of collaboration. And educators are going to have to understand that it is a political process to dispense information, and that communities are not going to be content with mis-information. Nor are they going to be content with the arrogant assumption that that the educator knows best.

REINHARDT: William Smith, Director of the Teacher Corps and a former public school administrator.

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MERROW: One reason given for limiting the parental role in running the schools is a constitutional one: if you give the people direct control, they'll be likely to run roughshod over the constitutional rights of the majority.

REINHARDT: Dr. Carl Marburger used to be State Superintendent of Education in New Jersey. He's now head of a citizens group -- but that doesn't mean he believes in community control.

THE VIEW OF A FORMER STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION

MARBURGER: I don't like the word "control." What I keep stressing is "shared decision-making." There are limits as to what the community can have decisions about because, by statutes, states determine that school boards have certain kinds of powers. There are kinds of powers that the states, at this point, cannot delegate away. That doesn't mean sometime in the future they can't.

MERROW: Like what?

MARBURGER: Well, the right to collective bargain at the district level, for example. The right to make the major appointments in the system, to appoint the superintendent, to appoint the principals on the recommendation and so on. There is the final vote on the board as to who appoints the various personnel who run the system. That has a real sense of control. But for parents to control the curriculum, to control everything -- who gets fired and hired -- I think is not feasible. But for them to be sharing with the decisions I think is feasible even with a strong union. Because I think that the teachers' organizations are recognizing more and more that they are not exactly the most loved citizens today. They need allies, and their strongest allies are the parents and the citizens in the schools where they teach who can provide for the teachers the kind of support base that says, "Hey, together we're doing a decent job, and these teachers deserve a decent salary; they deserve good fringes, and so on." As long as they continue to bargain separately and in secret, then there are going to be problems. That is part of the reason why, as a group, we're advocating open collective bargaining. Because that opens that process up and because I think teachers need parents. I think that it is workable. Now that doesn't mean it's going to be easy.

MERROW: Carl Marburger, of the National Committee for Citizens in Education in Columbia, Maryland. He was State Superintendent of Education in New Jersey.

WHAT ABOUT "UNFETTERED" LOCAL CONTROL?

ANRIG: "Local control," I think, is a very valuable aspect of the educational system in the country, and I wouldn't want to see that ended. On the other hand, saying that on a blanket basis -- unlimited, unaccountable local control -- also is the kind of situation where you end up where, for instance, black children are not being served equally, where handicapped children are being excluded from services, or bi-lingual children aren't being helped to make their way in an American, English speaking society. The old feeling of the family on the farm having complete control over their own destiny, given water and no storms and this kind of thing, but control over all other factors, no longer is the case. We are -- all of us -- more interdependent, and dependent on institutions and others to do things. That's just going to be a fact of life. It's not going to change; it's going to get worse as we look down the road.

But I'd also come back to this point. There is a stage at which we say that if a local officialdom is denying the rights -- the educational rights -- to a child, that we can't just say, in the sense of local autonomy, we're going to allow that to happen. There is also a basic constitutional responsibility that rests with the state level to see that that youngster gets the services that he or she is entitled to.

LOOKER: So you think the bureaucracy, or at least its representatives at the local level, can help encourage community involvement and perhaps even spawn community control to an extent.

ANRIG: Sure. I'm never sure what people mean when they say "community control." That can also be an abdication. I don't want to say that that's what I'm talking about. But, certainly community involvement in the sense of the school being open to advice from the public, giving people a chance to come in for a genuine role, and heeding that advice and doing something about it -- in that sense I think it takes school level leadership. I tend to find that schools that have active parent involvement are schools where the principal wants active parent involvement. And, frankly, I find where there is not parent involvement, I find principals who don't want it. So I think it's as clear as that. It can't be token. It won't work if it's token. And if you want advice, you should seek it; if you don't want advice, don't form an advisory group. Unfortunately, sometimes we form advisory groups that we really don't want any advice from. I think that's a misuse of parents' time.

REINHARDT: Massachusetts Superintendent of Education Gregory Anrig, talking with Tom Looker, WFCR, Amherst, Massachusetts. Anrig says that parents are more involved today, because federal and state programs require it.

MERROW: But two factors keep parents out of schools, Anrig says, more than the unions do. They are size and poverty. Big school districts often have

many poor children whose parents don't know how to make bureaucrats respond, especially the large bureaucracies that exist in the cities.

A WORKSHOP ON PARENT CONTROL

RODENSKI: ...I don't see, again, a lot of teachers in the Chicago Public School system. I don't see a lot of teachers holding each other accountable for professional standards, for professional accountability. So when I come off and I sound that way, it's because it's the parents that have to do that to teachers, because the teachers are not doing it to one another. They're too intimidated by each other. . . .

MERROW: Teachers and parents at The Alternative Schools Network Conference in Chicago. The workshop leader was Nancy Rodenski, a parent and leader of the Lakeview, Illinois, schools coalition. She wants parent control, but at the school level, no higher.

RODENSKI: They should have ultimate control over the kind of curriculum that is used in that school; in should be done by group census. There should be parent involvement in choosing programs for the school. There should be parent involvement in selecting teachers for the school. And there should be parent administrative involvement in looking at the overall goals for a particular school and the staffing that's necessary to meet those goals. And then they should be able to do it.

MERROW: How about budgets?

RODENSKI. Um, I've never really been involved in -- budget does not interest me. I can't balance my checkbook, let alone a million, billion dollar school budget. As far as I'm concerned, if parents have control over the selection and the hiring and firing of teachers and principals and over the curriculum and what goes on in the classroom, and they have that kind of power, they don't need to worry with the budget. Let the board of education raise the budget and deal with how it's allocated and all that kind of stuff. I'm just as happy dealing with program -- that to me is what's important.

MERROW: What you've laid out, though, requires a lot of energy. You're talking about control of hiring and firing. You're talking about curriculum. Whwere do parents get the energy to do that? You know, we all work full time.

RODENSKI: They'd use the same energy they use right now chasing their tails because the boards of education all over the country have them chasing their tails on trivial kinds of issues. As a parent with children in high school and one in an elementary school, I suffer the same frustration as every other parent in this city. And that is having little to no voice in who the teachers are going to be that teach in my child's school. The way I practice it, it's one on one, between me and my child's teacher. And as long as that teacher is accountable to me, fine. If I run into a teacher of one of my children that is going to begin to raise problems, then I'm going to go out and I'm going to raise hell about it. That's all there is to it.

MERROW: Nancy Rodenski, of the Lakeview, Illinois, schools coalition. She thinks that school boards deliberately keep large and controversial issues in the public spotlight in order to keep parents occupied, and thus out of their kids' schools.

REINHARDT: But, she says, parents ought to be in their children's schools, especially if they think things aren't going well. Work with teachers whenever possible, Rodenski says, but don't be afraid to confront the teacher if you feel your child isn't getting fair treatment or the individual attention he or she needs.

MERROW: School critic Jonathon Kozol agrees with Rodenski that parents should work with teachers, but not, he says, in the PTA.

THE PTA AND COMMUNITY CONTROL

KOZOL: More parents who really care about education are working at

the grass roots with good teachers who really care about education than ever before. Only you won't find them over tea and cupcakes at the PTA. You will find them, instead, at workshops where together they're learning how to change the schools.

LOOKER: So, you feel that there is an alliance of parents and teachers -- like an ad hoc alliance of parents and teachers -- that is at least one answer to the bureaucracy?

KOZOL: Yes. I think there's much more happening at the grass roots than the press reports. I don't think it's a conspiracy; I just don't think the press knows this. The best news that I've heard in years is that enrollment in the PTA has declined. Thank God. No more tea and cupcakes. Isn't it an artificial way for parents and teachers to get together? Everybody's scared stiff, nervous; it's so dull, boring. You never talk about education. Those meetings used to kill me. Then after school, you drop in to the neighborhood center. You sit down with parents and you say, "Now let's talk about what's really going on in school."

LOOKER: Well, let's talk about what's really going on in school in this context. The image is of the bureaucracy in Washington and elsewhere deciding that schools have certain social responsibilities. Certain socialization processes have to go on.

KOZOL: Like preparing people for the supermarkets and the military, and the voting booth, right.

LOOKER: And against that, one has the feeling of a great deal of discomfort on the part of parents and teachers at the local level.

KOZOL: There is a real groundswell in the country getting much stronger right now than at any point since 1970. A very vibrant underground, as it were, of enlightened teachers, teachers with guts, teachers who teach for liberation. I don't mean this in a dogmatic, political sense. I don't mean people who adhere to a Maoist or Marxist view, or something specific or that kind. I simply mean that teachers who have an earnest, honest interest in the freedom of the child's mind. These teachers are meeting with parents. It's interesting to see what happens. Often, the teachers start out with a little storefront. And they put in a coffee machine. And a few more teachers start dropping in after school, just to talk about what it was like. Then they put in a refrigerator and stock it with cold beer. Then, suddenly, a lot of teachers stop by after school to talk about what it's like. And then they decide to have a pot-luck supper, and maybe bring along a little something stronger than beer. And they find a lot of parents start dropping in to share with them, in discussion first, why the schools aren't teaching skills, then to plot with them the means by which to build that atmosphere of liberation in the classroom.

REINHARDT: Writer Jonathon Kozol, talking with Tom Looker. Kozol may be a bit behind the times regarding the PTA, which is no longer declining is membership and which has also mounted agressive campaigns to control violence and sex on TV, and to educate kids about the dangers of tabacco, drugs, and alcohol.

MERROW: Kozol is pushing what are called "teacher centers." He sees them as a way of reshaping public schools, putting them under control of activist teachers and parents.

REINHARDT: But Professor Joel Spring, an educational historian at the University of Cincinatti, doesn't accept any halfway measures when it comes to control of the public school.

HOW MUCH CONTROL?

SPRING: Parents should start working, as hard as possible, for a direct solution, and that is returning the power for the control of their education, their children's education, back to them. The key to that is the financial power that gives an individual the right to choose where then can send their child, within the framework of the requirements of the constitution. Now, as it is now, you have to be approved by the state, and it's that state bureaucracy which defines what a school is and what teachers are. Now, if we wanted

true community control, then the parents would not only have to break the public school monopoly over financing; they'd have to break the power of the state departments of education to regulate local schools. Now, if they were able to do those two things, they would no longer have public schools as we have them today. Right now, the tax credits that are being discussed before Congress, that's one possibiliby, to go in that direction.

MERROW: What are some other possibilities?

SPRING: The other possibility is to just dissolve the system.

MERROW: But, wait a minute. That's not a step. I'm sitting here wanting to do something to make my kid's education better, and you're saying, "Dissolve the system."

SPRING: First, these steps to take are some way of refinancing education so that the decision over how educational money is going to be spent is directly with the parent or the child.

MERROW: You're saying that's really too many obstacles to my getting together with a bunch of parents, making a parents union or someting like that, and wresting some control. You're saying I shouldn't be satisfied with some; I should go for the whole ball of wax.

SPRING: I think it's a utopian vision to think that you can form a parents union that's going to change the structure of education as it is today in this country. And a lot of people who fought the bureaucracies have reached somewhat similar conclusions.

REINHARDT: Joel Spring, a Professor of Education at the University of Cincinatti.

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MERROW: Joel Spring describes himself as an anarchist. He thinks the educational bureaucracy will eventually collapse of its own weight, and then true community controlled schools can be built.

REINHARDT: Kenneth Haskins probably woundn't want to be labelled, but the former principal of a community school says that genuine community control of schools is revolutionary, because it means a new group is taking power.

COMMUNITY CONTROL AS REVOLUTION

HASKINS: The reason I call it revolutionary is that that suggests a change in power relationships, and that's the only basis, I think, upon which real change is made. I think that curriculum changes, administrative reorganization, training people to understand how to function within the system the way that it is, all speak to keeping things the way that it is, maybe with a patch here or a patch there. But it doesn't change any drastic change. If, by community control, we mean poor people having something to say about what happens to them, or black people and Chicano people having something to say, that's revolutionary only in the sense that, in this country, black people were brought here to be controlled, not to be in control. And poor people are usually controlled by others. And when you begin to talk about the masses making decisions, that's usually a very different kind of system than the one that we have here.

Now, when we began with this movement, some of us, including myself, was naive enough to believe that America really wanted to educate these children, and that the only thing was they hadn't decided how to do it. And that if we could show them that it could be done -- if they turned it over to us, we would do it without any more money, without any more things, it could be done. If there was any place we were naive, it was in believing in the goodwill of people.

MERROW: What do you believe right now? You don't believe that the society wants to educate all its children?

HASKINS: I believe that middle class America, who basically are the

teachers and other people in the school, are not in the business of producing children that will compete with their children for what they already consider as a limited amount of jobs and things. I do not believe -- and I'm not talking about a group. Because there are individuals who do it and do it well. But as a group, I don't think that's the case. I think there are too many people who call themselves teachers and principals who are year after year comfortable in schools where kids are not learning as long as those kids are not their kids. And the more different in language, in color, in social class, the easier it is for them to accept that.

MERROW: Is community control by black people, by poor people, is that possible? You say it involves real changes in power relationships.

HASKINS: I'm not really sure what's possible. And, you know, I don't really gauge what I should do or not do by whether it's really possible or not. Now, I'm not saying, I'm not suicidal or anything like that. But I think that -- I don't think people can stand by and watch year after year their children be abused and not say something, and not try to do something about it. And, if militants take over, that's the nature of things. I don't think, although it looks like our country is geared that way, that our system was meant to exclude militants from being in public office. We've done a good job with our two party system, keeping militants -- but I think that's wrong. And when you have a community which is being put upon to the extent that the only people who seem to be able -- or the only tactics that seem to be able to get some response are militant tactics, then yes, you will get militants on the board. But that's as much of a problem of the people who are helping to cause the situation as the people in the community. A community that has no problems is not going to be putting militants on there.

REINHARDT: Kenneth Haskins, former principal of a community school, now a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

MERROW: On the other hand, Nat Hentoff, a journalist, gave Tom Looker an example of the tyranny of community control.

COMMUNITY CONTROL AS TYRANNY

HENTOFF: In New York City a while ago, they turned back a federal grant for jobs for kids in their district, in their district. These were summer jobs. It was the kind of a grant that was quite deliberately, quite openly skewered to give the jobs to poor kids. The only poor kids in that district, most of whom were bussed in, were black kids, Puerto Rican kids. Now, this middle class school board, all white, said, "We don't want that grant because it's un-democratic; it's an abuse of equal opportunity, the fourteenth amendment. There are deserving white kids who should have jobs too." Now most of the people at Queens, I think, applauded that. And, a good many conservatives would applaud that too. And constitutionalists, some of them, as well. But, God damn it, those poor kids need jobs.

If Congress, in its wisdom, perhaps by being asleep, did indeed pass that bill, let somebody bring it into federal court. I do not, by the way, think it's an abuse of the fourteenth amendment, but it could be. But, in the meantime, the example is that this board, if it had the money itself, if it didn't have to ask anybody, you can see what it would do for that money -- with that money.

LOOKER: So, Nat Hentoff, you feel that there are limits, there should be limits, to community control.

HENTOFF: Madison said, well, in 1789, "We got rid of the king; now we've got a new enemy. The new enemy is the majority when it becomes irrational or destructive." And that's why we have the Bill of Rights. And I think in that sense, not in a constitutional sense, but in a counter-power sense, the federal government is -- without any of the illusions, by the way, that come with the Roosevelt time, idealization of the federal government -- the federal government is just a kind of a cop here, sort of an involuntary, moral cop.

MERROW: Nat Hentoff says there have to be restrictions on the majority, to avoid its tyranny. Perhaps that's the problem, the majority isn't being restricted, and the rights of minorities are steamrollered.

REINHARDT: Preston Wilcox, who now teaches at Columbia University in New York City, was active in New York's decentralization battles over a decade ago. Wilcox says that decentralization did pay dividends, that schools in New York city are better now, and that parents do have more power, more access to schools.

MERROW: The access, and the power, are informal, Wilcox says, but nonetheless real. He discounts unions, calling them "employment agencies for teachers, with no interest in education, only in job security. Parents in New York City didn't get community control, Wilcox admits, but it wasn't all in vain.

WHAT HAS COMMUNITY CONTROL GAINED?

WILCOX: What's happened is that theres more parents on the inside of the school now. There's more parents who know what's going on in the school. So, it's less difficult now for a school administration to act without in some way taking into account how the parents will feel or react to it. Because the parents are in and out of the schools. They've got all these paraprofessionals in the schools. The schools are more open now, even though they've got security guards and so forth. There's a lot more public meetings around the schools. Not PTA meetings, but each month the local school board has a public meeting, and there's 500 or 600 people there. There's just greater access to what's going on inside the school than there was before.

MERROW: You started out, though, twelve years ago, looking for community control. You sound now as if you're satisfied because you got community access, community involvement.

WILCOX: No, what I'm trying to show now -- see, decentralization was really an attempt to recentralize the schools under the name of decentralization.

MERROW: Explain that.

WILCOX: See, we asked for community control, which means that we would have the ultimate decision-making, not only in the selection of teachers, but in the construction of schools, because we wanted to provide local jobs. They gave decentralization where they shared some powers with the local board. And, on many levels, they still retain centralized. See, like in the certification of teachers. The teachers are not certified locally; they're certified centrally. So, if we could certify teachers, we might develop some different critera. If we take the teachers they certify and pick out the ones that we want, understand that? But, since they develop the criteria for certification, they still have some control. We'd probably check out certification criteria by, "How do you feel about the kids," "Would you send your own kids to the school," "Would you live in the community," or "Would you work in the evenings," "What examples are there that you involve the kids," "Do you have a career orientation to the kids," "They want to become a doctor; you're helping them become a doctor in a math class."

The reason a lot of the white communities won't push for it is because the black communities pushed for it first. I mean, because the moment the white community begins to learn from us, something about their own educational process, their own people begin to call them "nigger lovers." So part of this is getting people to have the guts to become who they want to become, and to do what they believe is right. See, when my kids are going to the school, in many cases we're turning over to someone else, on the rules and regulations of people who don't even know our kids, who look at some statistical chart and say, "This is what the kid ought to be doing." In terms of career orientation, if you walk into any school, the teacher has no idea what the kid wants to become. But the parent knows, and the parent tends to work with the child along the career orientation. If your son told you today he wanted to become a doctor, no matter if you never went to school, the minute you saw anything about medical education, you'd be sharing it with him. You'd be exposing it to him. And that's how people really are shaped. But we have this clear division between what happens in the home and what happens in school.

Now I was in a school the other day and I asked the kids about their career orientation. They wanted to be engineers, pilots, lawyers, nurses. The teachers who work with them had never asked them that question, 'cause they

were concerned about one thing: getting the kids out of their class. Either passing or getting them through that year, understand? They had no personal investment in the future of their kids.

REINHARDT: Preston Wilcox, a veteran of New York City's battles over community control. He now teaches at Columbia University.

MERROW: Is community control a dead issue? Preston Wilcox says the effort in New York City was partly successful, because parents now have access to the informal sources of power, and they now understand how the system works.

REINHARDT: It's probably true that in most American communities, power is exercised and controlled informally. Parents are on a first name basis with the school principal, and maybe with a school board member or two.

MERROW: There are unspoken agreements to avoid controversy, and the values, most of them, are arrived at by consensus. In short, schools reflect the community.

REINHARDT: And that's local control, that's community control.

MERROW: In the past, most demands for community control have come from blacks and from poor people. But that doesn't mean that they'll be the only ones calling for more community control in the future. They'll be protests whenever parents feel that someone is taking their schools, and their kids, away from them.

REINHARDT: The majority of Americans want neighborhood schools, and anything that seems to threaten that -- whether it's a bloated educational bureaucracy, excessive demands form unions, or federal court orders to bus for desegregation -- will lead to calls for "community control."

MERROW: And today, many parents -- and we don't know whether they're right or wrong -- are upset by bureaucrats, by unions and by school bussing. We may be in for another, stronger cry for community control, but this time from the white majority.

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REINHARDT: Copies of this program, "Communities and their Schools," are available either in transcript form or on cassette tape. The transcript costs fifty cents. The cassette, five dollars.

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MERROW: I'm John Merrow. And this is NPR, National Public Radio.

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